U.B.C. Planning Papers

School of Community and Regional Planning

University of British Columbia
Vancouver, British Columbia

ISSN: 0828-2390

Housing that Grandma Helped Plan: Consumer Participation in the Process of Developing Housing for Older Persons

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CPI #22
February 1987

UBC PLANNING PAPERS
Canadian Planning Issues #22

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1. INTRODUCTION *

This paper discusses the relevance of involving older persons in the planning and development of housing which they or others like them will consume. A re-evaluation of current approaches to housing design and policy is necessary in view of the aging of the population and the growing recognition of the lack of housing choices capable of meeting the needs and preferences of older persons.

Analysis of the current situation of older people in its broadest social, political and economic context reveals an inherent ageism, as well as a negative social bias toward aging. This ageism and bias are primarily responsible for the current limited range of housing options available to older persons.

Consumer participation as a form of collaborative planning is discussed as a practical method which can lead to more humanistic and innovative approaches to planning and designing housing for our aging population. However, confronting the negative cultural bias surrounding "aging", "old age" and "older people" is a prerequisite to the evolution of collaborative planning practices. A more positive, unconstrained view of the possibilities of our later years and of the possible range of our housing options is necessary before a process based on participation can be fruitful.

*The author wishes to express appreciation to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation for its financial support through the C.M.H.C. Graduate Scholarship Program. The author is also indebted to J.D.Hulchanski for his editorial assistance and encouragement.

Definitions

In this paper, the term "older person" is used in lieu of "senior", "senior citizen", "the aged", "the elderly", as a neutral term for meaning any of the following: retired person, an individual over age 60 unless otherwise specified, someone receiving a pension based on age or retirement from employment.

"Ageism" is defined as a culturally-patterned negative response or stereotyping toward old age or older persons.

"Participation" is defined as involvement in the planning or design processes by specific users or by general types of consumers of housing.

"Collaborative planning" means a planning process undertaken by planners or other professionals in cooperation with non-professionals who are the consumers or users of the housing which ultimately results.

"Seniors' housing" is a term meaning housing that is specifically built or designated for older persons.

"Gerontology" is the study of aging.

2. DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS

One of the most important challenges facing Canada and other nations is the aging of the population. Meeting the housing and social needs of increasing numbers of older persons with a wide variety of needs and expectations will be a significant public policy issue impacting all areas of life in the decades ahead.

In Canada, demographic projections point to three significant trends related to housing:

a) The proportion of the population over age 65 will grow more quickly than any other age group, increasing from 9.5% in 1981 to an estimated 13.1% by 2011 (Ellingham, MacLennan and Dick 1984, p.12);

b) The growth in the number of older persons will rise from over 2.4 million currently, to 3.4 million by 2001, and nearly 4 million by 2011 (Ibid.);

c) There will be a heavy distribution of older persons in urban areas. In 1981, 78% of those over 65 lived in urban centres. Over 40% of these lived in centres of 500,000 or more population (Brink 1985, p.2). Currently in British Columbia, the City of Vancouver has 15.2% older persons, and 25.8% of the City of Victoria is over age 65 (Gutman et al 1986, p.26).

While these figures and the changes they forecast are specific to Canada, similar demographic shifts are or will be taking place in other areas of the world. The population of developing nations is 4-8% older persons, while that of developed countries is 15-20%. This trend is expected to continue until 2000 (United Nations 1982, p.24). However, in less than 50 years, the total world population will double, while those over age 60 will quadruple (Ibid., p.25). This radical change is so extensive as to have important impact at national and international levels, and to lead to deep-seated social, economic and political changes in all societies. Thus world population aging necessitates national as well as international policy planning. While the World Assembly on Aging advocates a human orientated approach to planning and development, this paper advances social attitudes and

planning practices which consider demographic shifts as well as human and social dimensions.

3. HOUSING NEEDS AND PREFERENCES

Although the proportion of older persons is currently growing, there is of yet little understanding of the varying characteristics, desires and needs of this segment of society. As has been widely noted in the gerontological literature, there is a diversity of older persons which is not recognized in public policy and programmes, nor in wider society. The tendency to assume that older persons comprise a homogeneous group with uniform preferences and needs translates into a limited range of housing alternatives made available to older people.

The numbers of older persons facing housing decisions in the future in Canada will reach over 1 million in the next 30 years (Ellingham, MacLennan, and Dick 1984, p.12). While existing housing will meet much of this demand, new construction is also necessary. However, a sufficient quantity of housing for older households does not necessarily meet needs(expressed or unexpressed). Also, to look at the currently available housing choices as those which are suitable or preferred by older persons is misleading in several ways.

The majority of older persons over age 65 in Canada would prefer to live in single-detached homes which they own. This is indicative of the societal ideal and is also a continuation of previous tenureship. This desire for homeownership is also inherent in the preference to remain as independent and self-sufficient as long as possible. However, for many older persons, this preference and the limited alternative housing choices mean that they remain in unsuitable

housing (too large or expensive to maintain), or they move at a time of crisis (health, financial) to undesireable accomodation that neither suits their needs nor their preferences.

If the demand for the number of the various units of available housing options is taken as indicative of need and preference, an erroneous view of the housing situation for older persons results. Similarily, assessing need using the waiting lists of low rental units is also inaccurate. A recent Vancouver study (Wilson 1981) suggested that only 30-50% of those on such lists are in need of housing, due to the duplication of names, failure to delete names, and inaccurate record keeping. Waiting lists are also misleading in that they do not name all those in need of housing.

How and how well the housing needs and preferences of older persons are met is contingent upon the social, political and economic context of aging, older persons and housing.

4. THE HOUSING CONTEXT

Housing for older persons cannot be understood separately from the general context in which it is based. How housing is developed, types produced, numbers of units, and their location, design and availability are determined by social, political and economic structure and conditions. A review of the wider context of housing illuminates the values and attitudes toward aging which underlie the housing situation of older Canadians, suggesting probable causes of ageism, housing gaps and unmet housing needs.

Social Bias

While ageism or negative attitudes, prejudice and stereotyping are declining, they are still important in how older persons are viewed by society and how they view themselves.

"Sociogenic aging" or the social roles which have been imposed on older persons when they reach a certain chronological age, has had a pervasive and enduring impact. Much of what Comfort wrote ten years ago still holds true: older persons comprise an "underprivileged minority" "made arbitrarily roleless" (1976, p.17) through "ejection from a citizenship traditionally based on work" (Ibid., p.16). They suffer from the loss of former roles and the imposition of a demeaning idleness and non-use in terms of the roles and values which give the lives of younger people meaning.

Comfort (Ibid.) terms old age the "second non-civic childhood" in which persons become dependent, detached and in need of assistance from others who know more or know best. Terms such as "the elderly", "the aged" and "senior citizen" connote a large, faceless group of similar persons with similar declining abilities, needs and preferences. Decisions regarding both the larger and finer issues and details are made by professionals and bureaucrats who deliver support services or develop, supply, or manage their housing.

Social housing built in the 1960's and 70's for such "statutory non-persons" (Ibid., p.31), also reflects this social bias: very little of the same type of housing is all that is required or economically possible. Thus, high rises containing hundreds of bachelor suites for older singles, and a few one-bedroom suites for couples were built in Canadian cities. A Canadian architect in 1980

exclaimed that there is a disproportionate number of these, when in 1973 the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) had strongly recommended one-bedroom suites (Murray 1980, p.167). As early as the time of the CCSD study, dissatisfaction was being expressed by older persons regarding the lack of space and privacy of these units (Audain 1973, p.368). Such problems are now heard as common complaints. In 1968, the Province of Ontario stopped building bachelor suites, yet it was not until 1985 that the British Columbia government followed suit. "The difference is simply a matter of size - about 37 square feet" (Ibid.). However, within the social context, the additional costs can be seen to be decisive. While bachelor suites are no longer to be built, these and their inherent social and psychological problems have become part of the legacy of seniors' housing in Canada.

The recession of the 1980's has meant economy in other areas of social housing. The amount of income paid on rent (Rent Geared to Income) has increased from 25 to 30%. Assisting only those 'truly in need' will likely mean that ghettos of poor older persons will become the norm in British Columbia and other parts of Canada.

Location of seniors' housing complexes in both urban and rural areas on cheap, available land rather than in locations which have the quality of life and independence of the older person as a priority also reflects the general societal value of old age and the status of older persons.

Older persons who are financially independent and able to meet their housing needs in the market also find inadequate units, designs, and locations. There are few alternatives beyond regular market housing for those who desire to move from their family homes, but who

do not yet need the care provided in sheltered or Long Term Care housing. Very few of the available options meet many of their current (or future) housing needs and preferences. Thus these "empty-nesters" are reluctant to leave their existing homes.

Homeownership is not an indicator of housing adequacy, affordability and suitability. In the City of Vancouver, more than half of those over age 65 own their own homes. However, many of these are overhoused: they consume family-type housing as singles or couples. Also, their housing costs (maintenance, repairs, taxes) may be so high that they face affordability problems and safety hazards. Similarily, if they are aging in place in the suburbs, their location may be far from both basic and specialized services which are required when capabilities begin to decline.

Developers have recently begun to look upon the older homeowner as a new housing market. Housing specifically designed and marketed to 'over 50's' is available throughout the suburbs of the Vancouver area. Thus while social housing policy supports Comfort's opinion (1976, p.31) that older persons "are seen as old first, and provisionally as a person second", those older persons with assets are seen mainly as a potential market. Resultant social and market housing may meet their needs and preferences. However, it is likely that choice increases and one's needs are more closely met the wealthier one is.

Political-Economic Context of Housing

Viewing the context of housing of older persons within society's macro-structure reveals the likely premise for social bias toward older persons. A value structure and worldview that is based in the

political-economic ideology of capitalism is evident in housing policy and programmes, and is implicated in the development of social bias and ageism.

While Canadian senior citizen and general housing policy and programmes have been shaped by constitutionally-based federal-provincial relationships, housing policy has for the most part been used as an economic stabilization tool within a Keynesian framework, and as a response to crises rather than as planned initiatives to meet housing needs. The stated housing policy goals of the British Columbia Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing in 1984 (1984, p.29) highlight this point:

a) Maintain a stable investment climate for encouraging the housing industry to develop housing;

b) Assist those with special needs for housing who cannot meet them in the market;

c) Encourage deregulation of the housing industry and reduce public service levels;

d) Support more effective use of existing housing;

e) Encourage federal government housing policies which support long-term private sector investments in housing.

Thus, social housing programmes are only weakly related to the availability or the affordability of housing for low income older persons. Numerous submissions to the recent provincial government Commission of Inquiry on Social Housing (May 31, 1986) describe the outcomes of this housing policy: limited housing programmes and deficient funding.

Subsidies, the primary form of social housing assistance for

older persons, enhance the profitability of construction, maintenance and rehabilitation, while they do little to get at fundamental housing problems. The limits to available funds for all social housing results in older persons and various other special needs groups making gains at the expense of others. This is the current situation in the Province of British Columbia and is one of the main reasons behind the formation in 1985 of the B.C. Housing Coalition.

Such limited assistance is in sharp contrast to recent housing policies in recent years which support the private sector. Federal income tax and interest payment deductions have benefitted homeowners. Similarily, developers and investors have profited from interest-free loans and tax incentives which have enhanced the profitability of building new rental stock. Unfortunately, the resultant rental units are well above the affordability of those most in need of housing.

Thus housing policy and programmes have viewed housing mainly as a "product" that has value within the political-economic system to the neglect of meeting shelter needs.

Origins of Ageism

A brief structural analysis or examination of the relationship of older persons with the systems of society, reveals the ageism which underlies their current housing realities.

Both "conservative" and "liberal" viewpoints as defined by Olson (1985) accept the underlying premises and relationships of the current system under capitalism. Gerontologists, planners and others who work within the conservative frame of reference, seek to assist older persons in preparation for, adjustment to, and acceptance of what old

age brings. Under the liberal perspective, older persons are seen to have rights to their fair share of societal resources and are victims of the modern industrial system which forced them into dependency by rendering their skills obsolete, demanded retirement, and lessened family ties. Thus, the current problems of old age, including inadequate or unaffordable housing are a result of imperfections in the market system.

Under a more "radical" or structural perspective, the values and ideals of individualism and the free market system permeate the study of aging, current social attitudes toward old age and aging. These values are likewise inherent in housing development, policy and programmes. Olson (1982) argues that housing inadequacies amongst older persons are due mainly to income and minority status, rather than to age itself. Insufficient incomes lead to poverty as a direct result of the unequal distribution of power and income. Midwinter (1985) concurs and argues that the institutionalization of retirement has resulted in political and economic alienation of older persons. Succinctly put by de Beauvoir: "Society cares about the individual only in so far as he is profitable" (1977, p.604).

Focusing on the individual's adaptation to society and its systems seldom leads to consideration of the necessity for change in that system itself (Marshall and Tindale 1978). To paraphase sociologist C.W. Mills, public issues become reduced to private troubles (Ibid.). The system remains intact and the individual is expected to make adjustments in an attempt to accept the results.

Regardless of which structural perspective is chosen for analysis or as a working philosophy, it is undeniable that a paucity of

appropriate housing alternatives, inadequate or unaffordable housing, and poorly designed and managed housing, all result from the status of older persons within society and its systems.

While there must be an awareness of the macro-level social, political and economic forces that shape housing options and choices available to older persons, it is important that consultation with older persons be the basis for the widening of their housing alternatives. Housing that meets needs and preferences can only be developed through the participation of older persons at all levels of planning. Creating participatory roles for older persons would also assert the "normalcy" of aging and the right of older persons to their share of societal resources. Moreover, including older persons in planning and developing of housing would result in housing which would more successfully state and incorporate their housing needs and priorities.

5. CONSUMER PARTICIPATION

Rising out of the 1960's trend toward increased public participation in community affairs, participation in housing planning and design was an offshoot of community and urban planning. However, opportunities for the involvement of older persons in the housing development process as users or consumers has been limited. This is summarized by the phrase "housing (done) for" rather than "housing developed with" older persons.

Planning Practices

Past and current planning practices have rarely included the subjective point of view of older persons in the area of housing. Exceptions can be seen in:

a) periodic surveys of tenants of social housing or cooperatives by government or other agencies;

b) needs assessment surveys by non-profit groups as stipulated in grant applications;

c) public meetings as part of citizen participation in local issues;

d) questionnaires used by developers and others to determine what aspects of housing (locational, amenities, design features) are most important to older persons;

e) post occupancy studies carried out as part of architectural services, or as independent and academic reseach.

Becker (1977), in discussing environmental participation, distinguishes between users and consumers. User input differs from consumer input in the point at which participation takes place, the type of input it is, and its consequences. The value of user input is "process", while consumer participation results in information or "product". Because consumer input occurs before specific users are identified, general information about similarities in values and preferences amongst groups of individuals can be obtained for planning purposes. This is not to lessen the importance of the more specific user participation in design, construction and throughout the lifecycle of housing. Becker (1977) sees user and consumer participation as complementary and necessary.

Van Dyk (1978) in his discussion of cooperative housing, uses a model of participation based on two forms: creative or reactive, with input from professionals and others such as users. The types of user participation based on level of input are defined by Wandersman (1979, p.191) as:

a) full user control and full decision-making powers;

b) chosing among alternative plans or designs;

c) reactive, feedback, advice or consultative role;

d) non-participatory role.

All of the above noted exceptions to non-participation by older persons in housing issues and planning are reactive feedback, advice or consultation. By Wandersman's (1979) definition, consumer participation precludes decision-making in specific projects. However, as the following section of examples of projects successful in involving older persons show, there is room for experimenting with more creative consultative roles and input by older persons at a variety of levels.

Examples of Participation

While user participation has been an essential component in the development of cooperative housing, Van Dyk (1978) suggests that participation should be encouraged in the private and public housing sectors. There are a variety of examples of the participation of older persons in planning and housing issues. The following are included as illustrations of housing-related initiatives at national and local levels which include the perspective of older persons in varying degrees.

A) The rennovation in 1984 of a seven-unit historical Vancouver row-house by an architect-consultant and six others including one older person, illustrates creative, full user control in decision-making. While the interior of each 1800 square foot 3 bedroom unit was designed with each owner, retention of the original character resulted in a Heritage Award. Not only has this private development resulted in high quality housing and high user satisfaction, total costs ($30 per sq.ft.) were considerably lower than costs of government funded housing ($50 per sq.ft.) or other developments ($40 sq.ft.). Thus there is unrealized potential for private developments to meet financial criteria as well as housing needs and preferences of older users or consumers, through their participation.

B) As an example of Wanderman's (1979) second level of participation (chosing among alternative plans), a mid-seventies San Francisco redevelopment project (Hartman, Horovitz and Herman 1976) was based on participation of tenants (single, low-income older persons) in a user needs survey. This survey consisted of small group discussions centered on slides of various alternative design issues and features which illicited the views, comments and choices of potential users. The study resulted in a set of guidelines for the designer of four scattered redevelopment sites. The technique and process used in this study also emphasizes the importance of going to the environment of the consumers and fitting into their lifestyles when seeking consultation or other types of participation.

C) The Canadian federal government through Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (C.M.H.C.) sponsored tenant participation in two Manitoba public housing projects in 1974 and 1975 as a response to the

public participation trend (C.M.H.C., 1979). The purpose was to improve housing environments and to provide social benefits, including social cohesion amongst participants, education about the housing development process, pride and responsibility. Design benefits included a better environment and more sensitive design fitting the needs of participants and others with similar needs. High quality information also resulted which corrected misconceptions about public housing, and provided guidelines generated from user priorities for the allocation of limited housing dollars for maximum benefit. Consumer participation can potentially yield similar results.

D) Other Canadian examples of the contribution of older persons in housing design issues include research and publications. Building Better, is a book by older persons which describes design features compatible with their housing needs (Crawford 1980, p.123).

The National Advisory Council on Aging (NACA) has acted upon its principles in recognizing that older persons want a voice in housing decisions through its recent activities on a multi-diciplinary task force with CMHC and the Canadian Housing Design Council. The task force exposed and debunked generalizations about seniors' housing needs, building upon the NACA acknowledgement that older persons prefer to live autonomously in the community and most preferably in their own homes. The result, a book entitled Housing an Aging Population: Development and Design Guidelines (forthcoming) is a planning and design resource. Using a detailed checklist of design features, it informs older persons and others how to identify their housing needs, adapt or rennovate existing accomodation, or design appropriate new housing that will accomodate changing abilities.

The comprehensive H.I.N.T.S. Report was undertaken by an organization whose membership is largely older persons (Housing in North Toronto for Seniors, 1981). It illustrates the possible outcomes of collaborative projects. The report focussed on the housing of local older persons, and the interviews were conducted by senior volunteers.

E) The general public, analysts, academics, government officials and housing professionals are beginning to learn more about housing from from the perspective of older persons in the Vancouver area. The City's Special Council Committee on Seniors has appointed senior spokepersons who study and report to City Council on many issues involving older persons. The Liaison Committee of the Gerontology Association of British Columbia uses the principles of the World Assembly on Aging in promoting the viewpoint of older persons. This focus on the perspective of older persons was central in the live-televised February 1986 Housing Forum, and the follow-up November 1986 television programme on Retirement Housing Alternatives. It was also featured in the November 1986 New Westminster Seniors' Housing Symposium.

As indicated by these examples, there are many possible forms of consumer participation and user participation which are useful in developing housing for older persons. However, awareness, understanding and acceptance of collaborative planning by professionals is a necessary first step before the potential of consumer participation can be realized.

Rationale for Participation

While collaborative planning may appear to pose a threat to the role of planners and other professionals, it essentially calls for more flexible use of their professional skills in graphics, communication, and in their ability to create or generate alternatives. Collaboration necessitates an expanded and more creative role for professionals whose skills can facilitate the comprehension, interest and learning of participants so that there is more understanding and greater participant competence.

Including older persons in the planning process asks the professionals to be more accountable and responsible for their output and to their clients or constituents, without projecting their own interests and values onto the "users". Schiff states "... Projection is not sufficient, since our expectations ... may be quite different" (1981, p.172). Thus consumer or user participation legitimizes the planner's role to one beyond that of advocacy planning. Participation allows the values, standards and judgments of consumers or users to be integrated into the planning process.

Francis (1978) argues for the "de-professionalization" of participatory processes to make them more open and inclusive of the skills and ideas of both lay and professional persons. In Midwinter's "re-professionalization" of professionals, they are the servant of the consumer, entering into dialogue with them, and leading them "actively and constructively into the fraternal world of popular democracy" (1985, p.28). This new professional would perform the role of "convenor or steward of the activities of elderly people, rather than the purveyor of services to them" (Ibid., p.31). Thus collaborative

planning can be one venue for social change. That planning involving older persons must be ongoing and continuous is summarized by:

> What is appropriate for those who are seniors today may not be appropriate for seniors 20 years from now. Seniors themselves will be different and so will the social context in which they live. (Schiff 1981, p.173)

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has emphasized the importance of involving older persons in both general and specific housing issues and planning. In searching for and creating suitable and affordable seniors' housing, older persons have experience and knowledge to offer. Generating a wider range of housing choices can best proceed with their participation. Furthermore, the concerted effort required to meet the housing needs of current and future older persons cannot occur without their meaningful participation at many levels of planning and development of housing. Participatory rather than paternalistic forms of activity for an aging population are worthy of a maturing nation such as Canada.

While the sheer numbers of future older persons will inevitably result in changes to ageism and current housing realities, fundamental changes in attitude begin with "our own rejection of it for ourselves, and then in our refusal to impose it on others" (Comfort 1976, p.33). But it is Blythe's clarity which cannot be ignored: " The present situation cannot change until we drop our detachment...Until society can say 'We are they', things will remain much as they are" (1980, p.104). As Humphrey Carver wrote, we at least owe it to ourselves, "the old people of the future" (1962, p.108). There is no better nor

more basic reason for professionals such as planners to serve their own future self-interests while developing better housing policy, programmes, environments and dwellings with persons who are now older.

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